

replaced by a turgid belly laughter of distended cloth. We cannot suppress a smile of recognition as we see and hear the concrete stretch against the resistance of these membranous skin. The unashamed eroticism of these columns is a welcome release from the dry concerns of a dead geometry. The humor in this work is infectious, like the mocking grotesques of the medieval masques that slip between the all-too-serious concerns of load and geometry. Laughter is a form of lubrication, an emotional graphite that releases the friction of the suppressed.

#### (Dubbed) Postscript

In a postscript to "The Aleph", Borges questioned the opacity of his vision with the thought that it must have been a "false Aleph." This was due to some subsequent, esoteric research on the subject which located the "true" Aleph inside "the pillar of a mosque from the seventh century."

Evidently the true Aleph was invisible and could be located only by a "busy hum" discernible when one put an ear up against the column. The memory of Beatriz also fades as the Aleph slips from view into the opacity of the stone column; the beautiful face that carried the promise and memory of the metaphysical and now mythical point that gave transparency to all things.

"I myself am distorting and losing under the wearing away of the years the face of Beatriz." [19] The lament of Borges is for the passing of an age of great and beautiful visions. Its highly visible frequency has now been absorbed by the low, resonating medium of the dub. As a player of this dark medium, Mark West is always careful to remind us of its origins in the slippery regions of our embodied soul. The lesson of the light Aleph is that vision is made with nothing more than the afterglow of the things of this world compressed into a point. The desire for transparency is met with a fleeting vision. Possibly, the dark Aleph shows a more inclusive and forgiving way.

—DAN HOFFMAN



1837 Tenth Street, Bernadette Fox REPORTS 4

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PRESSURE BUILDINGS AND BLACKOUTS  
Mark West

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by  
Dan Hoffman

## LIGHT ALEPH - DARK ALEPH

In his story entitled "The Aleph", Jorge Luis Borges speaks of "one of the points in space that contains all other points." This is the Aleph, "the only place on Earth where all the points are seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending." [1] Borges' attraction to the Aleph is an attraction to the possibility of vision itself, the idea that universal knowledge can be accessed through a kind of seeing that makes all things transparent to themselves. The Borges of the story longs for this vision to recapture the object of his desire, the beautiful Beatriz. The fact that Borges, the author, was blind only adds to the poignancy of the tale. In this light Beatriz can be understood as vision herself and the bright (and impossible) dream of the world that she brings for Borges. The dark and narrow cellar where Borges encounters the Aleph underscores the difference between the "limits" of our (blind) bodily condition and its transcendence through the illuminated vision of enlightened thought. Vision and beauty have historically assumed a powerful combination that has assigned an aesthetic to metaphysics, an aesthetic that Borges savors in the story with the delicate and lamenting memory of an old love.

Our interest in seeing all things clearly has placed considerable emphasis upon the eye and vision, the most acute of the senses. The endeavor of vision and the inner workings of the eye has founded models of understanding that would lead to conceptual knowledge of the absolute. Understanding in this way, the absolute, or "truth", is an all-encompassing transparency of the world mediated through the visual mechanism. Although the Aleph of Borges is a vision of this truth, the historical Aleph is actually divided into the conditions of the light Aleph and dark Aleph. [2] The manifest certainty of the former is contrasted with the elusive uncertainty of the latter. If not in light, then how is the dark Aleph to be known? Does it open itself to us in a singular, brilliant flash or is it accessible to us by more peripheral, or even furtive means? If the light Aleph is eminently locatable in a point, then the dark Aleph is located at all? Borges does not speak of the dark Aleph but one would suspect that it is not far away, for the depth of things is not only understood through the light of vision or certainty. This "depth" is the fertile soil of embodied circumstance from which a sense of things emerges, the surround from which the perspective of the Aleph is unearthed. It is the very "life-world" that we exist in from day to day, a world whose banality often masks the extent of its profound being. The banality is the background of the story, the seemingly ordinary life of unfulfilled passions, locked doors and empty streets. This is the world that the light Aleph illuminates with its brilliant transparency and focus. The dark Aleph offers another understanding, one that approaches from the underside of things, compounding opacities to a subtlety that spirals beyond our comprehension.

What has caused us to favor the light Aleph and its vision as the metaphor for knowledge? No doubt the precision of the eye was inspirational for its ability to locate constructions such as a geometry between the mind and the physical world—a metaphysical connection that maintained its precious balance until the beginning of the modern age with its emphasis upon abstract construction as the foundation for knowledge. This emphasis displaced the balance of the metaphysical connection that sought to mediate between mind and body, or construct and world. The historical remains of the metaphysical connection of mind and body has come to us in the form of perspective, which remains the dominant form of visual representation in our culture despite its problematic claims to its truth. Its position has been altered largely through the dissemination of imbedded perspective drawn in visual media such as the lens and the flat screen. Accompanying this advance, however, has been the persistent and sometimes furtive reminder that there is always something not seen, that there is a "true distance to the seen of a given to be seen." [3] Though the light Aleph prefers to see all things clearly, it is not exempt from this view that desire itself is visible. This un-seen aspect, the "stain," as Lacan calls it, infects our presumptions of clear seeing as knowledge. It is that which impels our vision and yet is invisible to us except in the form of an incidental trace. It is always elusive, leaving its mark as a disturbing reminder that the unconscious is always implicated in that which we gather around ourselves in vision. Merleau-Ponty refers to another aspect of the not-seen in the form of the shadow that is necessarily part of the spatiality of sight: "We see that the hand pointing to us in [Rembrandt's] *The Nightwatch* is truly there only when we see that its shadow on the captain's body presents it simultaneously in profile." [4] For Merleau-Ponty "...to see an object, it is necessary not to see the play of shadows and light around it." [5] The light of vision is permeated by the tonalities of darkness, for within sight itself we find a virtual world of oppositions that give form to an image. Lacan gives another example of the un-seen in the phenomena of anamorphosis whereby an image is presented to view that is warped or displaced from a preferred axis of viewing. In the painting *The Ambassadors* by Holbein, two figures are presented to the viewer in a straightforward manner except for a rather mysterious un-formed area (stain?) before them that "appears to be flying through the air." [6] However, when one turns away from the picture and views it monocularly at an oblique angle, the figure of a skull emerges from the horizon of un-formed area. The skull serves as a reminder of that "other" vision residing in perspective. We come to realize that the point of view that perspective offers comes through the displacement of all that is not shown in an oriented view that behind or within the "clarity" of perspective lies the inextinguishable dark component of the death, the dark Aleph. The skull emerges from this other territory. The vanity that causes us to not see its disturbing presence is in the very logic of the perspective point of view.

Something of the "death" is visible in the "unconscious" of mediated technology today in the form of home videos, snapshots and dubbing. Its widespread distribution is now forcing us to confront what was so carefully hidden before. Our "vanity" is being exposed and eroded by a dark humor that cannot be suppressed.

It is the tenor of the age and Mark West plays it with abandon.

## Surviving Logic

The dark Aleph is without this singular point of view. Rather, its function is to disperse vision from a unifying, metaphysical aspect. Many of the experiments of modern art have taken as their theme the questioning or dis-illusioning of the unifying view. In Mark West's early drawings this questioning is flagged with the rueful title, "Surviving Logic." Here he accepts the pervasive and pressing demands of the "logical" tradition of vision served up by the phenomena of perspective, yet seeks to undermine its very foundations through a manipulation of the means of its representation. "Surviving Logic", then, is a viral operation upon the perspectival code, one that feeds upon the powerful ordering of its parts. These inversions take the form of cut-ups of found (perceptively generated) photographs which are manipulated further by erasing, or blanking out, various sections within them. This double, or "dubbing" operation disperses the perspective of drawing and erasure does not cancel out the function of vision, but rather enfolds it upon itself. Here we find ourselves in a viscous medium of sight, inside a black eyeball of space, a place where the "busy hum" of potentiality and the proliferation of shades exist without point of view. The double negation (cut-up-erasure) liberates the field of the picture, preparing it for an inclusive rather than an exclusive field of operations, a space for a bricolage of immensity and minute proportions.

## BLACKOUTS

In subsequent work, all vestiges of Cubist (cut-up) manipulations are erased. This comes as a result of the refinement of the erasure procedure by the so-called "blackout" technique where the cut-up photographs are painstakingly drawn over with graphite. In such a way a fine-grained darkness infects the tableau, distributing throughout an aura of perspectival depth without the unifying organization of a single point of view. One could say that the atmosphere of perspective haunts the scene, wherein each particle of the drawing possesses its own genius of depth. The manipulation of the point of view shrinks and stretches objects out of recognition into a myriad of lenses coursing through the space of the image—an anamorphic field where things warp out of recognition. There is the disturbing feeling that we have sensed something of them before, an unsettling *déjà-vu* without the reward of a final recollection.

West is characteristically vague concerning his methods. But how does he achieve the fuzzy precision of his drawings? How is this fuzzy precision possible? How is he able to sustain such an intensity of invention? Considering the problem of his technique further, I have found it helpful to refer back to Leonardo's instructions on drawing in his *Treatise on Painting*. The passage is quoted in full since it bears an intriguing, but curiously inverted relationship to what one would suspect to be the drawing technique used in the Blackouts:

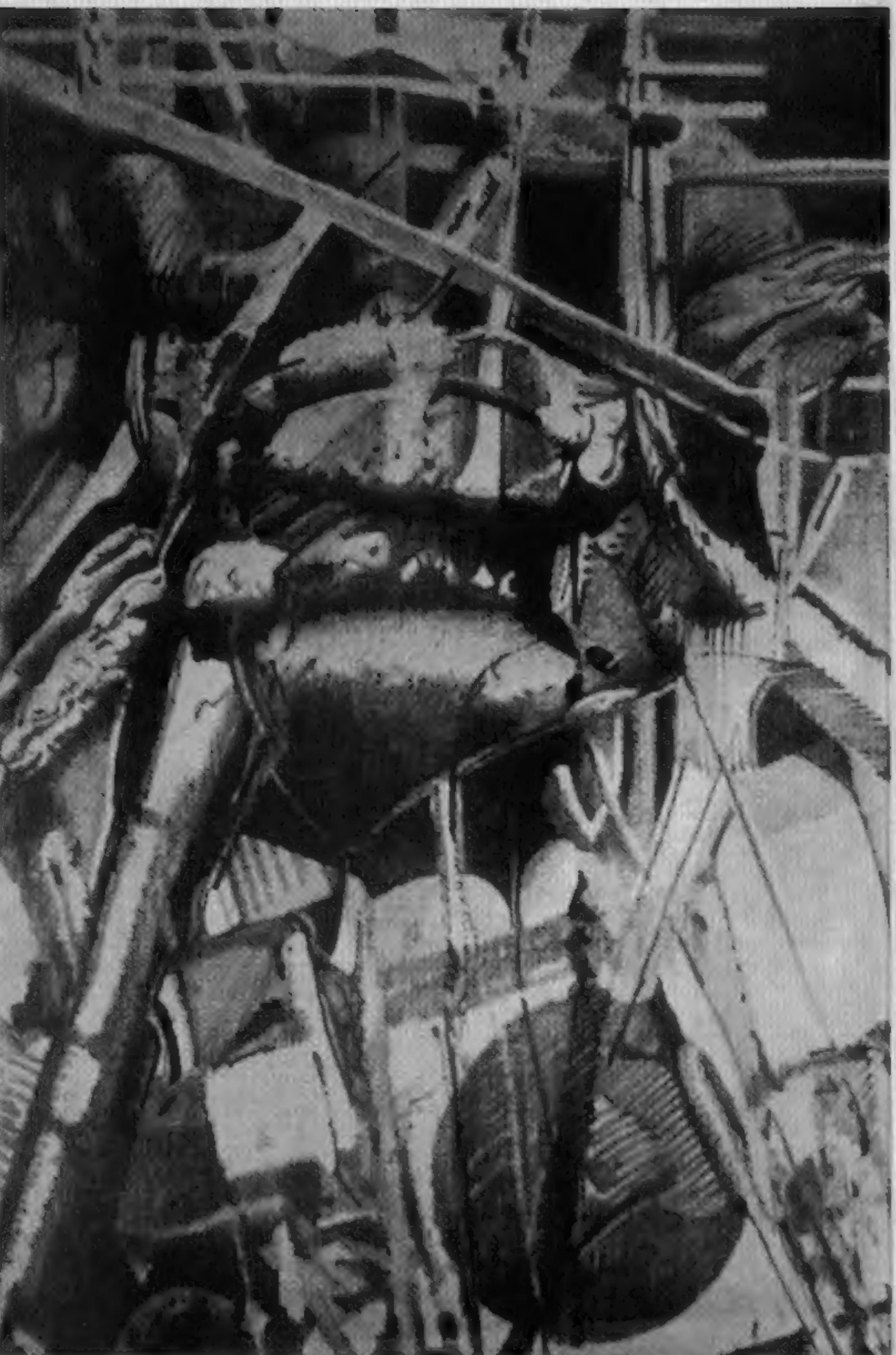
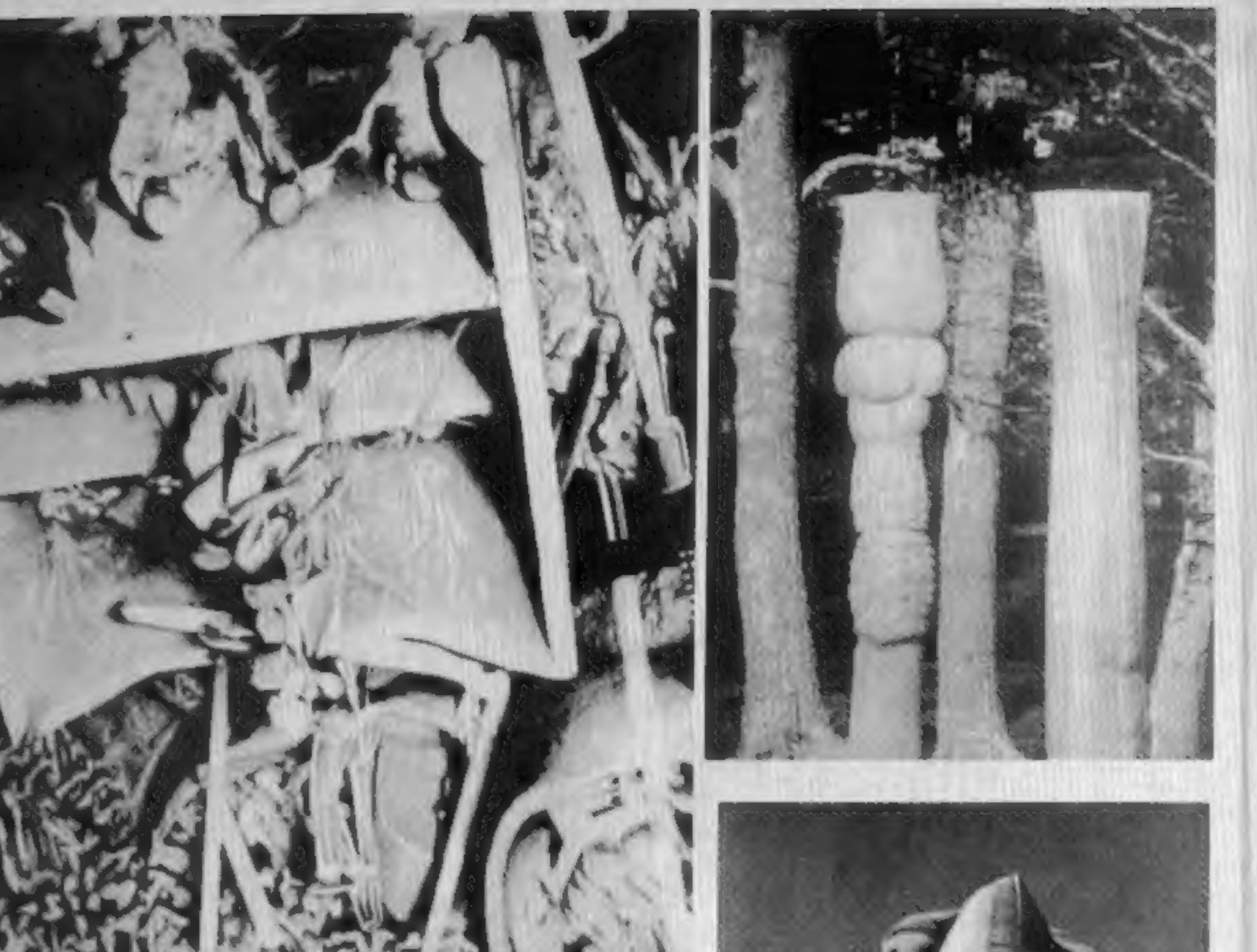
## A Way of Developing and Arousing the Mind to Various Inventions

I cannot forbear to mention among these precepts a new device for study which, although it may seem but trivial and almost ludicrous, is nevertheless extremely useful in arousing the mind to various inventions. And this is, when you look at a wall spotted with stains, or with a mixture of stones, if you have to devise some scene, you may discover a resemblance to various landscapes, beautified with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys and hills in varied arrangement; or, again, you may see battles and figures in action; or strange faces and costumes, and an endless variety of objects, which you could reduce to complete and well-drawn forms. And these appear on such walls confoundedly, like the sound of bells in whose jangle you may find any name or word you choose to imagine. [7]

Leonardo asks us to begin with something indeterminate and arbitrary in vision such as a stain. The variety of imagined objects are then to be "reduced to complete and well-drawn forms" (my emphasis). West, on the other hand, begins with photographs that, by their nature, already possess fragments of completed form, which are then separated upon or "seized" to the point that they are just unrecognizable. Rather than reducing the photographic image, the graphite infection multiplies its readings through binding or mating it to other adjacent images making the "image" continually slip out from recognition. The resulting drawing possesses a density of possible interpretations similar to that of Leonardo's stain. Indeed, it would seem from the title of his instructions on drawing that Leonardo himself was more intrigued by the "various inventions" to be found within the indeterminacy of the stain than in the completed, drawn forms. His fascination with the fertile field of the stain points to a latent, even psychological recognition that the stain can absorb projections of the desiring subject through its indeterminacy, not unlike the blotsches of a Rorschach test. West plays upon this indeterminacy by bringing an image to the precise underside of recognition as an object. We have the sense of what the anti-figures of the Blackouts might be, but naming them is a slippery task that demands invention and interpretation.

## DRAWING AS LUBRICATION

The choice of the method of partial erasure is significant, for graphite possesses a continuous gradient of tone from the lightest of greys (or light-blacks) to black itself. This enables West to match any tone on the surface of the photograph, thereby freeing up the rigid perspectival organization that binds it to recognition. The result is an aqueous field of vision that erases the edge-like distinction of an object to its surround—replacing the recognition of the object with a knot-like twisting and inversion. The fluidity of the graphite has no planar edges, its molecular structure encourages the continuity rather than the discontinuity of surface and space. The lubrication of this edge of identity is similar to the lubrication of walking in a dark night where the visual field is blurred. In this sense, the space of darkness is like a medium that dissembles the threshold of things, blurring the distinction of bodily limits. The space of darkness is filled, it touches us directly, enveloping and penetrating us throughout. We find that the ego is permeable to darkness and not to light. By immersing ourselves into darkness all manner of desires



## PRESSURE BUILDINGS AND BLACKOUTS

are loosened and exposed, and here we begin to encounter the danger of the dark Aleph, for as opposed to the simultaneous transparency of the light Aleph, darkness opens towards an unending obscurity of body. It is a "descent into hell" [8] fraught with the temptation that through the "generalization of space and matter" [9] we can become one with all things. If there is a primal substance in West's universe, it certainly would be an ooze rather than a solid or void. The innumitude resolves itself in the substance of matter rather than the emptiness of a void. It is the very opposite of the pure spatum of Descartes, that abstracted extension that enables the projection of the logic of vision and reason.

The Blackouts of Mark West offer us a reenvisioning of "truth" as symbolized by the light Aleph. Within the darkness of the Blackouts the unforeseeable replaces truth as clear foreknowledge. The transparent truth of the light Aleph is dissolved into a medium of becoming within which lurk shadows of doubt and wonder subversive to the control of objective vision. (By objective I refer to the mathematical means of quantifying and locating objects in space.) The double action of drawing and erasure does not cancel out the function of vision, but rather enfolds it upon itself. Here we find ourselves in a viscous medium of sight, inside a black eyeball of space, a place where the "busy hum" of potentiality and the proliferation of shades exist without point of view. The double negation (cut-up-erasure) liberates the field of the picture, preparing it for an inclusive rather than an exclusive field of operations, a space for a bricolage of immensity and minute proportions.

## THE THEATER OF AMNESIA

Today "all things" include not only the biological realm of plants and animals and the geology of minerals, but also by-products of a delirious surplus of production. The shift is paralleled by a transformation in the technique of making the drawings. Photographs are no longer used as a departure point as they had been in previous series. In this most recent work the virtuosity of the hand has absorbed the spatial genetics of the Blackouts and can now draw in their absence. But has the photographic been removed altogether? Possibly the *Dr. X* and *Y* series are drawings over photographs of previous work projected onto a surface with a slide. Here we have work that feeds upon itself, one technique subsuming the other. The title of the series can be considered as another transformative play upon the inheritance of a previous, perspectival age, wherein the *X* and *Y* of Cartesian geometry are supplanted by West's precocious abandon, his desire to plunge into the underbelly of sight.

## DUS AND BLIND VARIATION

What emerges from this process are West's latent obsessions with vegetal organisms and their usual appetites. Technology has now entered the bloodstream—an occurrence long predicted by William Burroughs. No longer can we contrast biology and technology, industry and sea, human and vegetal, and production from waste. Bodily desire is now the great engine that secretes itself into venous passages of the environment. West treats this ingestion with humor of a body circulating with the amorous juices of plants, their delinquent chemistry loosening our most serious endeavors. Drunkenness is the triumphal eruption of the plant in us. [15]

The "eruption" of the vegetal body in this most recent work has been accompanied by a movement towards the possibilities building in the cloth formwork. The experiments West has aptly named "Pressure Building." This form of erosion is all the more notable for its close affinity to the drawings in the *Dr. X* and *Y* series. It is as if by becoming vegetal the drawings could actively grow themselves off the page. Like the Blackout technique, the simplicity of the basic system belies the virtuosity possible in its execution. As I understand it, a sack of cloth is held up by a scaffold and bound in blacking out or staining the surface of images within the space of the photographs each aspect of the image is reached into and touched. The tension of the touch is not to fix the image in space, but to stain it with another, more powerful code to break the habitual recognition of an object of vision. West points out that like the base lines of reggae, the medium of the Blackouts is absorptive to the many "samplings" of formal debris that can be played within it. The base is the prime generic code common to all the samplings. In his musical experiments West has claimed to have found the *drum code* common to the Bulgarian Women's Chorus, the chants of the Kalahari Bushmen and Frank Sinatra. This master dub in the Blackouts is not developed consciously, for it would be impossible to pre-determine the sense of a work of such complexity. Rather, the code is found through a persistent and thorough trial and error method of "blind variation" [11] that seeks to find a way through the unthinking recognition of renewed images of production. In such a way a momentary integration is achieved, the tonality of sight is altered and another environment created.

This cycle of adaptation through transformation is similar to the theories of evolutionary epistemology as put forth by Karl Popper and others. In their view, knowledge is related to the process of active transformation of an environment through chance or "blind" mechanisms of change within an organism. As Popper would have it: "organisms by being active seekers are the active makers of their sense." [12] These newly developed senses direct the organism (or intelligence) towards new aspects of the environment which they colonize and therefore transform. Knowledge can be understood as a manifestation of a sense, a guide for behavior in the environment.

The trial and error method is considered as the explanation of an organism's need to see through the continually emerging problems that confront it in its environment and is similar to my theories of how West operates upon his work. One proceeds here by a strategic circling around that which is unknown, an eye-hand meditation similar to the back and forth seeking or fleeing motion of organisms. This circulation of knowledge and vision through the random processes of

nature and the survival imperatives of the body illustrates the latent biologism in West's work. The dry metaphors of physics do not function here. In the Blackouts, we are immersed in photo-synthetic mediums observing the growth and decay of forms. Vision is no longer represented by the transparent intelligence of light, but is submerged into blind variation processes, the foundation for the intelligence of seeking organisms. Light is not necessarily the guide in the seeking. In one of the many myths inspired by science, Günther Wächtershauser has recently speculated that the first sensory reaction of the earth's primal organisms may very well have been a flight from light rather than an attraction to its nutritional possibilities. He argues that these early organisms did not have the more complex feature of a protective, peripheral layer and by necessity sought the darkened environment of clay or sand for their inhabitation [13]—hence the darkness of the earth (and body) is haunted by a mud alive with organisms that flee from light. Intelligence is born with a tropism that is drawn to the protection of opacity rather than the destructive exposure of light and transparency.

## Vegetal Erections

"Only human beings, tearing themselves away from peaceful animal horizontal, at the cost of the ignoble and painful efforts that can be seen in the faces of great apes, have succeeded in appropriating the vegetal creation and in letting themselves be polarized, in a certain sense, by the sky." [14]

—Balala

Biological preoccupation intensify in West's work as it moves from the Blackouts to the *Dr. X* and *Y* series. This shift is paralleled by a transformation in the technique of making the drawings. Photographs are no longer used as a departure point as they had been in previous series. In this most recent work the virtuosity of the hand has absorbed the spatial genetics of the Blackouts and can now draw in their absence. But has the photographic been removed altogether? Possibly the *Dr. X* and *Y* series are drawings over photographs of previous work projected onto a surface with a slide. Here we have work that feeds upon itself, one technique subsuming the other. The title of the series can be considered as another transformative play upon the inheritance of a previous, perspectival age, wherein the *X* and *Y* of Cartesian geometry are supplanted by West's precocious abandon, his desire to plunge into the underbelly of sight.

What emerges from this process are West's latent obsessions with vegetal organisms and their usual appetites. Technology has now entered the bloodstream—an occurrence long predicted by William Burroughs. No longer can we contrast biology and technology, industry and sea, human and vegetal, and production from waste. Bodily desire is now the great engine that secretes itself into venous passages of the environment. West treats this ingestion with humor of a body circulating with the amorous juices of plants, their delinquent chemistry loosening our most serious endeavors. Drunkenness is the triumphal eruption of the plant in us. [15]

The "eruption" of the vegetal body in this most recent work has been accompanied by a movement towards the possibilities building in the cloth formwork. The experiments West has aptly named "Pressure Building." This form of erosion is all the more notable for its close affinity to the drawings in the *Dr. X* and *Y* series. It is as if by becoming vegetal the drawings could actively grow themselves off the page. Like the Blackout technique, the simplicity of the basic system belies the virtuosity possible in its execution. As I understand it, a sack of cloth is held up by a scaffold and bound in blacking out or staining the surface of images within the space of the photographs each aspect of the image is reached into and touched. The tension of the touch is not to fix the image in space, but to stain it with another, more powerful code to break the habitual recognition of an object of vision. West points out that like the base lines of reggae, the medium of the Blackouts is absorptive to the many "samplings" of formal debris that can be played within it. The base is the prime generic code common to all the samplings. In his musical experiments West has claimed to have found the *drum code* common to the Bulgarian Women's Chorus, the chants of the Kalahari Bushmen and Frank Sinatra. This master dub in the Blackouts is not developed consciously, for it would be impossible to pre-determine the sense of a work of such complexity. Rather, the code is found through a persistent and thorough trial and error method of "blind variation" [11] that seeks to find a way through the unthinking recognition of renewed images of production. In such a way a momentary integration is achieved, the tonality of sight is altered and another environment created.

We seem to be in the presence of a trick that twists the logic of vision, an ancient slight of hand that curiously finds itself at home in the complex and dizzying world of polymer-cloth and biology. It is also impossible to predict what the form will do when the cloth is tensioned. The form of the pour is an exact record of the distribution of the loads as they appeared at the concrete's hardening—work process that records the pressure loads within it. The relationship between the liquid concrete, the pliant cloth and the resisting ropes are all registered upon the surface where tension realises the form. Tensioned by the wall, the wall is distended to its limit fluids within the cloth itself. The tautness of the cloth wall defines its shape and is a sign of the cell's life. Such is the scientific term to describe "the impenetrable erection of plants" [16] referred to by Bataille. This erection is the brief, "explosive" growth along the vertical axis along a radius of the Earth, connecting the root of the plant in the earth to the "infinite expanse of the sky." [17] Growth along this axis always has its vertiginous dimensions, for it is also the axis of the gravity of falling bodies. The brief flowering of a vegetal growth is accomplished despite the loads that pull it back to the Earth. We anticipate its collapse, for we know all too well the weight of days on our bodies, the sinking power of gravity that draws us to our graves.

It was the fault of the architect Gaudi that turned the descending force upon itself so that it ascended in the form of a construction of stone, a miraculous victory in the form of a mirrored reflection of a catenary force diagram. The result were buildings that grew up from the Earth with the familiar aspiration of a "vegetal erection." The columns of the architect West are alive with the same vibrancy, the soaring aspect of Gaudi's fault being